



DANCES OF SUMATRA AND NIAS:
NOTES BY CLAIRE HOLT

Preface

Early in 1938 Mrs. Claire Holt and the Swedish archivist and patron of dance Rolf de Maré travelled through Central Java, Bali, the Celebes, Sumatra and Nias, filming as many dances as they were able to witness. Their materials were destined for the Archives Internationales de la Danse, which de Maré had founded in Paris in 1932. De Maré filmed in both color and black and white; Mrs. Holt and Hans Evert (de Maré's assistant) shot thousands of black and white still photographs; and Mrs. Holt took dance notation and wrote down what the dancers and onlookers said about the dances. The de Maré team also collected some two hundred items--paintings and drawings illustrating dances, dance programs and books, costumes, masks, musical instruments and puppets for the Archives' museum. In February 1939 this collection was exhibited at the Archives, and a catalogue of objects and motion picture films with Mrs. Holt's explanatory notes and comments was published.¹ It is evident from this catalogue that Mrs. Holt and de Maré managed to collect a remarkable amount of material during their brief trip. In the course of World War II, the Archives were moved from Paris and now form the principal part of The Dance Museum of the Royal Opera in Stockholm, Sweden. The photographs are part of the collection of the Drottningholm Theater Library.

The de Maré Archives were conceived as a storehouse of raw data which might be used by dance historians but which also, and perhaps more importantly, would stimulate dancers and choreographers. The Archives' researchers in the Netherlands Indies, consequently, focussed on the "how to" of dance and on seeing and recording as many performances as possible. They did not have the time to inquire very often about the "why" of the dances they observed and discovered only peripherally how the dances fitted into ceremonial or social contexts.

In 1939 the Archives published an account by Mrs. Holt of part of this journey, *Dance Quest in Celebes*. In it the dances which the team saw among the Macassarese, the Buginese and the Sa'adan Toradja are described, illustrated with more than one hundred photographs. Mrs. Holt points out in the Preface that the book is "merely a contribution of some facts about dances in Celebes [and is] by no means a study."² She knew that the dances recorded were a limited sample and might or might not be a trustworthy basis upon which to generalize even about dance styles and techniques. She thought of

1. Claire Holt, Théâtre et Danses aux Indes Néerlandaises (Paris: Librairie G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1939). See also: Comtesse de Coral-Remusat, "Exhibition: The Theater and Dance in the Netherlands Indies," Indian Art and Letters, 13, no. 1 (1939).
2. Claire Holt, Dance Quest in Celebes (Paris: Les Archives Internationales de la Danse, 1939), p. 6.

the book as a modest supplement to the films and photographs. However, *Dance Quest* remains an important, indeed unique, resource for students of dance and of Indonesian culture. As yet no one else has undertaken the extensive and detailed research into Celebes dance which Mrs. Holt anticipated. The book remains the sole record of many dances now rarely if ever performed.

Mrs. Holt had planned a similar, generously illustrated book describing the de Maré group's experiences in Sumatra and Nias. She had already written extensive notes before World War II interrupted her work, forcing her to put the manuscript aside. In the late 1960's she again became interested in her thirty-year-old notes, but before she could begin in earnest the task of re-working them, she died. Her notes and photographs describe dances and ceremonies that have not been fully described or illustrated elsewhere. Some are still performed but have changed radically, some are no longer performed at all and are perhaps forgotten. As with the Celebes dances, no other scholar has taken up "the quest," and so the notes and especially the photographs are significant historical remnants. Since the materials on the Batak, Minangkabau and Nias dances are the most complete, they will be presented in successive articles. Even though these materials are fragmentary and Mrs. Holt herself felt that they leave many questions unanswered, we believe they might kindle the loving interest of a new generation of dancers, historians and students of culture.

Arlene Lev

DANCES OF NIAS*

Men's Dances

We were met at Orahili by the chief, *si'u'u*, a man with a deeply lined face and heavy features. His costume was striking in its peculiar combination of simplicity and splendor. His thighs, chest, and arms were bare. A thick tassel of bark cloth hung from the front of his short loincloth. Diagonally across his stomach he wore a magnificent sword with a silver band encircling its sheath and a carved hornbill-head handle. A rattan ball studded with boar tusks, tiger fangs, and crocodile teeth was also fastened to the girdle. The ball was thought to transmit the power of these animals to its wearer. His sleeveless jacket had pointed shoulder wings. An intricately knotted cloth covered his head and around his neck hung a glistening dark ring, the headhunter's necklace.





The main feature of the warriors' costume was a metal armor jacket with upturned shoulder wings and a spine of toothlike protuberances. We saw a presumably older war jacket made of crocodile hide instead of metal. Probably the toothlike ornaments on the metal jacket were an imitation of the natural ridges on the crocodile skin. Under the armor, the men wore three or four brightly colored vests topped by a long-sleeved jacket in red, yellow, and black. Instead of the chief's cloth turban, they wore metal helmets, some decorated with feather or fiber wreaths. A few wore flat, cut-out metal mustaches, some of gold. Like the chief, they wore the all-important tooth-studded rattan balls and headhunters' necklaces.





As we talked to the *si'ulu*, we saw not far away down the street a tall, truncated pyramid of stone. This was a high jump hurdle for village youths to train in the famous Niha sport, *fahombe*. To our delight, the chief arranged for a demonstration. We watched one youth after another take a short run, leap onto a well-worn boulder at the foot of the hurdle, and then sail over its top, feet forward, landing on the rough, heavy paving stones. The men landed on resilient bare feet, again and again. This was a fine introduction to a community whose greeting was "*Djaho*." Strength.

The heroic qualities of Niha culture were confirmed when we first saw the Niha men dance at Bawomataluwo. From the windows of the chief's house we observed a horde of warriors, perhaps two hundred strong, storming down the wide street towards us. Their arrival was wild and yet magnificent. They came stamping and shouting, brandishing their spears and rattling their tall shields.



The most impressive dance we saw at Bawomataluwo was the great round *maluaya*. Though clad in warrior costume, the dancers carried no weapons. They formed two concentric circles, both of which moved slowly counterclockwise. Holding hands, they accompanied their movements with resonant choral chanting. At first glance their steps looked deceptively simple, but an attempt at imitation proved that they were difficult to execute. The sequence read as follows: step-right, step-left, step-right-draw-up-left, stamp-left-forward, draw-back-left-kicking-right-foot-forward. This pattern of steps in measured rhythm caused the circles to shrink and expand, as if they were breathing. A feeling of solemnity and strength emanated from the circles of men dancing and chanting in unison. After perhaps ten or twelve minutes of this stately slow moving round, the tempo gradually accelerated. The chanting became abrupt shouting. Hands dropped and the round culminated in a grand finale of high jumps accompanied by rhythmic shouts.

Dances with weapons have a variety of functions. Since inter-village wars are no longer fought in Nias, there is no occasion for their function strictly speaking as war dances--in preparation for battle and in celebration of victory. Yet in 1939, they were still performed at weddings, harvest time, rites for the dead, and at the erections of the stone monuments. In these cases, the dances may have been thought of not only as a spectacle to enhance the celebration but also as protection. The brandished weapons were to frighten away evil forces or spirits.





At Bawomataluwo, the dancers, armed with spears and shields, performed the *fatele*. They divided themselves into two parties with a captain and a lead singer heading each group. The dance began as the two captains jumped high into the air, drawing up their legs, frog-like. The contraction of the legs mid-air accentuated the height of the jumps. They landed on one foot kicking the other forward, rushed towards each other with stamping steps, then stopped and stood as if ready to spring, rattling their shields. This was a prelude to a number of mock duels between the warriors, each repeating in a general way the captains' steps. Some dropped their spears and drew swords; others made sudden stabs and darts. This was explosive, exciting war play. There was a grand finale, the shouting warriors leaping high into the air, then dissolving into disorder as the men scattered all over the plaza.



The *mamualo*, or *foalo*, like the *fatele*, was an armed combat dance. The dancers again divided themselves into two opposing parties. Each consisted of three files of warriors fronted by a row of three or four leaders. First the leaders of the left party and then those of the right jumped into the air, frog-like, their shields and spears popping up and down. The files of warriors began a slow, orderly progress in four-quarter rhythm--two bobs in place, the body turning slightly to the left and then to the right, a stamp forward with the left foot, and a step to bring up the right. The stress was on the third beat, the stamp. The dance culminated in an emphatic jumping chorus followed by a sudden free-for-all. Individual warriors dashed forward in a rapid staccatto of short shuffling steps. It was not a run; the knees remained bent so that the dancer was projected forward without rising and falling. They stopped abruptly and threw their spears or sticks at their opponents who reciprocated. The mock battlefield became a scene of utter confusion, warriors darting to and fro, spears flying, and everyone having a wonderful time.

The next spectacle was *faluya zanocho* which, we were told, was originally a headhunters' dance-song. An imposing triple file advanced first in a straight line which curved into a semi-circle. The steps of the dancers were accentuated by an eerie rattling sound, something like "rrrrrrrdm," produced by knocking their shields against a shell on their wrists. This muffled vibrating accent came with hypnotizing regularity on the fourth beat of a sequence of movements: two-steps-forward, stamp-to-the-left, and stop, with "rrrrrrrdm." After repeating this sequence several times, the dancers stamped with one foot three times in succession shouting, and then returned to the four beat progress forward, halting to rattle their shields. Then the movement changed to short leaps followed by a skip. The rhythm quickened as the three files rose and fell in unison to the shouting of the dancers. Finally the formation broke up and the warriors plunged into group and individual mock combat.



Women's Dances

At Hilimaetaniha we had the opportunity of seeing *mogaele*, a ceremonial procession of women usually performed at harvest time or at the wedding of a chieftain. The women were adorned in very colorful and elaborate costumes. They wore red felt skirts topped by corselets made of tiny gold and yellow beads, held together in front with wide copper buckles. A blouse draped like a shawl, of light gauzy red material, was tucked into the corselet. Over their collars, of blue and black, were bib-like neckpieces of yellow beads and heavy neck rings of twisted gold. Hanging from their ears were long pendants of gold, with special ornaments at the lobes. On their hands were bands of gold, at the back of which was attached a horizontally protruding wooden rod with five golden discs at either side. Yellow felt flowers and feathery ornaments decorated their hair.





The total effect of red, yellow, gold, and black against the expanse of gray stone was magnificent. The procession of ten women, arranged in two files, was of the same stately solemnity as the arrival of court dancers at the *kraton* of Central Java. The movement of the files along the street was incredibly slow by Western standards. I tried to time the steps which took at least five seconds for a foot to come forward and touch the pavement again. The left arm came forward with the right foot and then, with a very slow but continuous movement, the left foot, standing upon its ball, was shifted forward for the next step. With downcast eyes and completely immobile faces, the women proceeded in a straight line until the front pair curved outward to reverse their direction, and the files retraced their steps.

At Lahusa-Idanotai we were led to a large, seemingly neglected ceremonial place in all shades of gray. Rising from the stone-paved ground were large, mushroom-shaped tables. To our great surprise we soon discovered that the large stone tables were used as dancing platforms. Fantastically decorated benches, some in the shapes of animals, stood in one corner. Set against the greenery of the surrounding vegetation and the deep blue of the sky, this expanse of stone, its chipped and crooked surfaces sprinkled with light gray moss, looked more like an abandoned cemetery than a dancing place.





Here in Lahusa, all the assembled dancers were women and few of them young. There was a very old lady among them who soon proved to be the most accomplished dancer.



Their dress consisted of the habitual wrap-around skirt, with a short or three-quarter-length coat and a long scarf. They wore ear ornaments made of two adjoining half-closed rings the size of bracelets, and flat bands or turbans on their heads.

The first dance we saw at Lahusa-Idanotai was called the dance of the hawk. This dance, like many of those of the Niha women, was based on the imitation of birds. Two women, one of whom was the old lady, ascended adjoining round tables. Though there was no music, not even chanting, the movements were so beautifully phrased and the steps so precisely rhythmical that the dance seemed complete in itself. In contrast to the usual setting for dancers in Indonesia, who perform on the ground surrounded by their audiences, the tables became pedestals for the dancers, removing them from the on-lookers below. The circular tops, no more than three-and-one-half feet in diameter, naturally determined the choreography.



At the beginning of the dance, the two dancers picked up the ends of their scarves, spreading them to the side like wings. The effect of wings was strengthened because the scarf had been pinned together on the chest, and thus the ends spread from a central point. Rhythmically and gracefully, the dancers took tiny hopping steps forward and to the side, inclining their bodies in the same direction in which they moved. They held the scarf ends spread to the side and with a gentle undulation of the arms suggested the flapping of wings. After each phrase of tiny hops and flaps, they paused and slowly rotating their bodies in place, led the outspread scarf in a wide rising and falling curve. Their inclined heads and downward glances added to the effect of large birds hovering in the heights. These sequences were repeated--the light hopping advance alternating with the smooth, expanding movement of a gliding bird.



There was no discernible interplay between the two dancers, nor were the movements simultaneous. And yet the effect was harmonious. One of the dancers occasionally dropped the scarf and seemed to suggest space and flight by tensely outspreading her fingers and leading her hands, palms down, along a plane on the level of her chest and shoulders. We could have watched for a long time this soundless song, with the wonderfully sustained, delicate passage of slow rotating, hovering movements and the punctuation of lightly skipping feet.

The subject suddenly changed, and two different women danced as cats. The cats coiled as if to spring and claw at each other. This dance was called *fanari mogo*, or *fanari mao-mao*. The hands and fingers, curved like cats' claws, played the predominant characterizing role. The dancers, each one on a table, faced each other with tensed claws and stepped back a little, turning their bodies away from the other. Then moving nimbly on bent legs, the dancers advanced towards each other again.





When to our great regret the performance of animal dances was ended, an elderly woman mounted the table and began to sing, accompanying her song with dancing movements. The song, called *fanona*, was an invitation, promising hospitality and chanted when guests arrive at a feast. She sang her exhortation in heroic style, emphasizing the rising passages with her body and arms.